

Selected Articles from *The Individual* November 1996

Since 2002, each new issue of the SIF's journal, *The Individual*, has been uploaded onto the SIF's website at www.individualist.org.uk as a PDF file. Before that, online availability was very limited.

To remedy this, we have reconstructed back-issues of the journal using only the core articles. We hope that you will find them of interest. Any comments should be directed to the current editor of *The Individual* at editor@individualist.org.uk.

Please note that views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the SIF but are printed as a contribution to debate.

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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

Dr Jeremy Dunning-Davies

Yet another summer is now passed in which record passes have been recorded in the A-level and GCSE examinations. Once again, headteachers and others in the educational establishment have eulogised the efforts of the pupils and reviled the questioning of standards by such as Sir Rhodes Boyson — indeed, again this year, some have suggested that Sir Rhodes should test himself in competition with some of the supposedly abler A-level students. It has been claimed also that the universities, who receive the products of this system, have voiced few worries, so why should anyone else be expressing serious doubts? This argument has continued unabated for several years now and the country seems no nearer to receiving an explanation. Hence, it seems not unreasonable for a university scientist to express some views based on factual observation.

It is undoubtedly the case that the number of A-level passes is increasing yearly and the number of grade A passes is also increasing — so much so that it is now not uncommon to find students with three or more "A" grades. However, when these academic high-flyers arrive at university, what do members of staff find? As has been the case for many years, and this is fairly well documented, there seems little correlation between A-level performance and final degree performance. More serious is the fact that so many students with good A-levels display a poor knowledge and little understanding of their subject when they go up to university — and this a mere few months after sitting their A-level examinations! It is fairly easy to offer an explanation for this. Perhaps the students concerned have very good short-term memories but cannot retain knowledge over a longer period. But it is more difficult to explain the genuinely very good students who show good understanding but perform poorly at A-level, only to blossom subsequently and gain excellent degrees. It has to be realised that there are too many in this latter category for anyone to feel completely happy with the *status quo*.

It is not easy to explain away these lingering qualms, but they do exist and university staff find evidence to sustain their worries each time they lecture. It has to be stated immediately that the blame cannot, and should not, be placed on the schools or the teachers; they do the job required of them by the examinations and the examination boards, and all the evidence indicates that they are doing it increasingly well. Nevertheless, when they come up to university, many students with good A-levels are found to be lacking in basic knowledge. This is certainly true in mathematics, so much so that many good university science departments find themselves forced to organise remedial mathematics lectures — although they are not necessarily referred to as such!

So what of the boards themselves? What part do they play in all this? Firstly it is difficult to understand why, in this day and age, there are so many boards. Comparability of standards has been another sore point in educational circles for many years and this entire question would disappear if there were only

one examination board for the whole country. Obviously, the boards are an historical anachronism which has outgrown its original usefulness — but the boards themselves are now big business. The success of a particular board is measured by the number of candidates it can attract, and one method of increasing numbers is to make the examinations of one board more attractive than those produced by the competition. This *inevitably* leads to "easier" examinations. The recent report claiming that A-level examinations are no easier than they were some years ago has to be viewed with scepticism. In science it is undoubtedly true that first-year undergraduates are less well prepared than they were — possibly this is due, in part at least, to the modern practice of handing out formulae sheets so that students have to *learn* less.

Again, the boards seem to exercise considerable power. Recently, modular A-levels have been introduced. There are many arguments for and against this form of A-level. Probably the main one against is that they seem to favour candidates with good short-term memories. When these examinations were first introduced the boards concerned produced sample papers with accompanying solutions. The solutions also contained *very* detailed marking schemes; so detailed that the solutions *must* have been scrutinised in great detail. Nevertheless on the sample mathematics and chemistry papers of the London board^[1] there were several extremely bad errors — in chemistry it was claimed that the electron was one of the elementary particles found in the nucleus of an atom, and in mechanics friction apparently acted *in* the direction of motion. Mistakes inevitably occur but, when contacted by telephone, the board would not disclose the names of the chief examiners concerned and gave the impression that they thought a lot of fuss was being made about nothing. Given the detailed mark schemes on these samples, major doubts must arise about the subsequent A-levels set by this board and the actual marking of the scripts.

Having noted the power of the examination boards, the whole question of where the real power in education resides must be addressed. During the lifetime of the present government, a number of excellent educational reforms have been suggested. But unfortunately most foundered when it came to their implementation. The power of the civil servants at the Department for Education (DFE) seems insurmountable. No sooner does Sir Geoffrey Holland leave the DFE than he is appearing on television delivering a vitriolic attack on the government whose declared policies have not been implemented accurately by a department of which he was head. Before one has had time to recover from this attack, however, the system has ensured that he is back on government committees in a position of influence once more. For anyone with a genuine interest in education and the future of this country, it has been clear for years now that people outside the elected government are effectively pulling the strings to achieve results that they desire, rather than implementing the avowed policies of the government. It is also disturbing to note that many of the

so-called experts on education have very little practical experience in a classroom. For example, according to *Who's Who in Education*^[2], Professor Ted Wragg taught from 1960 to 1966 and Sir William Taylor from 1956 to 1959. Is this truly acceptable experience for people so influential in education?

Education in this country does not seem to be in the healthy condition it once was. It is undoubtedly time for an unbiased review of the system — particularly from GCSE level upwards — by people who have the good of the country and of the country's children at heart, rather than by those more concerned with self-interest. Usually, in education, the dictum followed is that "all that is old is bad". Let us hope that the way forward will be to realise that the country used to have a good, even enviable, system of education which was, and still is, admired by many. This old system may have required some fine tuning but certainly not the butchery it has suffered. It is to be hoped that it is not too late to rectify the situation.

References

1. London Examinations, University of London Examinations & Assessment Council, A-level Specimen Papers (in Mathematics & Chemistry) 1996.

2. *Who's Who in Education* (Mercury House Business Publications Ltd., 1974).

Dr Jeremy Dunning-Davies was born in 1941 in Glamorgan, the son of a primary school headmaster. His mother and wife were also teachers before their respective marriages and this teaching background has given Jeremy an abiding interest in education at all levels. He was appointed to the Applied Mathematics Department of Hull University in 1966 and Senior Lecturer in 1981. Works include: "Mathematical Methods for Mathematicians, Physical Scientists and Engineers" (Ellis Horwood, 1982); "Concise Thermodynamics" (Albion Publishing, 1996); and about 75 articles, mainly on thermodynamics and its applications, particularly in astrophysics.

CONSERVATIVES AGAINST FEDERAL EUROPE

Sir Richard Body MP

Not every member of the SIF is a conservative. Indeed, most of the founder-members of the Society were highly critical of the Tory party, being themselves firmly rooted in the old and true Liberal tradition.

But every member will agree, I hope, that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the principles of the SIF with support for the ambitions of the European Union.

For any Conservative, at least one with a single libertarian gene in the blood, whether in or out of the SIF, the door is wide open to our new organisation, Conservatives against Federal Europe.

It becomes the first and only organisation within the party to argue the case against our country being submerged in a union of states with another structure of government superimposed upon them. As the structure has been ruled by a Franco-German axis ever since its inception, a counter campaign against a federal Europe within the Conservative party is overdue.

Over 700 came to the launch of CAFE at a fringe meeting of the Party conference. The eight former whipless MPs, since renamed the Westminster Eight, acted as patrons. They do so because after they became whipless several thousand people wrote in support. These thousands are going to be sent membership forms, and if only half of them join, CAFE will become the organisation within the party with the largest membership.

We are convinced that 99% of the party is opposed to a federal Europe. But the remaining 1% includes some powerful names, three Cabinet ministers, a selection of merchant bankers and financiers in the City, and similar people who see a personal advantage to be gained by a single currency and

therefore a political union (for one will certainly lead to the other).

If that influential minority is to accept the verdict of the majority, a really large membership, with representatives in every constituency, raising a voice loud and clear is essential.

To get that membership is our first objective. I do hope every SIF member who is a Conservative will join. In doing so they will be playing a decisive role in saving our country from a form of government that will never have any sympathy with the libertarian ideal.

What is more, once we are locked inside a federal system it will be well-nigh impossible to get out. Once inside, we will watch our liberties taken from us, and see denied every principle in which we believe, as the integration of Europe proceeds to "an ever closer union", as ordained by the Treaty of Rome. This is no time to sit back and leave the battle for others to fight. CAFE provides the means for every Conservative to enter the battle, a battle we must win.

To join please write to:

Conservatives Against Federal Europe, London House, 53-54 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4RP. Associate subscription is £5, but full members paying £20 will receive 6 issues of *CAFE News*, 6 issues of *Eurofacts*, and 12 Bulletin Briefs, as ammunition for the battle.

[NB: Since this article was written, and with the election of Iain Duncan Smith as leader of the Conservative Party in 2001, CAFE appears to have been 'suspended'.]

THE CASE AGAINST GUN CONTROL

Sean Gabb

Since I am one of the few people in the country willing to say this, I want above all else to be clear. So let me begin by saying that I believe in the right of adults to be able to walk into a gun shop, and, without showing any licence or proof of identity, buy as many guns and as much ammunition as they can afford. I also believe that adults should be free to keep guns at home and carry them about in public, and use them in defence of their life, liberty and property. I am not saying this because I am a gun owner: I am not, nor ever have been. I say it because I believe that the right to self-defence is a fundamental human right, comparable to freedom of speech and association. Anyone who is denied this right — to keep and bear arms — is to some extent enslaved. That person has lost control over his life. He is dependent on the State for protection.

Of course, most people will say that I am mad. Do I want a society where every criminal has a gun, and where every domestic argument ends in a gun battle? The short answer is no. The longer answer is to say that more guns do not inevitably mean more killings. There is no evidence that they do. What passes for evidence is little more than an excuse for not trusting ordinary people with control over their own lives.

Take armed crime, both professional and domestic. Great Britain had no gun controls before 1920, and very low rates of armed crime. Today, Switzerland has few controls, and little armed crime. Those parts of the US where guns are most common are generally the least dangerous. There is no necessary correlation between guns and armed crime.

Focusing on professional crime, gun control is plainly a waste

of effort. Criminals will always get hold of guns if they want them. At most, it needs a knowledge of the right pubs to visit. All control really does is to disarm the honest public, and let the armed criminals roam through them like a fox through chickens.

Indeed, free ownership of guns may often reduce armed crime. Just consider what might have happened had someone else beside Michael Ryan been carrying a gun in Hungerford High Street in August 1987. He might have been cut down before firing more than a few shots. Think of the burglaries, rapes and other crimes that might never happen if the victims were armed, and therefore able to deal with their aggressors on equal terms. As the saying goes: "God made men equal, and Smith and Wesson make damn sure it stays that way".

But let us move away from armed burglars and rapists and the occasional lone psychopath. We need guns to protect us from the State. So far from protecting us, the State is the main aggressor. A low estimate puts the number of civilians murdered by states this century at 56 million — and millions of these were children. In all cases, genocide was preceded by gun control. How far would the Holocaust have got if the Jews in Nazi Germany had been able to shoot back? How about the Armenians? The Kulaks? The Chinese bourgeoisie? The Bosnians? In all previous societies, guns and freedom have gone together. I doubt if our own is any different.

Laugh at me. Call me mad. Call me evil. But just remember me when you or your loved ones are being raped, or mugged, or dragged off never to be seen again — and you are an obedient, disarmed little citizen who can do nothing about it.

THE 'NEW' EDUCATION DEBATE

Paul Anderton

Education has always been largely about indoctrination. The first schools were primarily for religious indoctrination with skills such as literacy and numeracy included for good measure. In fact there were two kinds of church school, the choir school for choristers and the grammar school for teaching the litany — names which have survived to the present. Whilst the church was primarily interested in the effectiveness of the indoctrination, the pupils and parents were primarily interested in the literacy and numeracy skills.

(If you do a conceptual analysis on "indoctrination" you will conclude that the only viable interpretation is "to teach a set of ideas without regard to their truth". The ideas might in fact be true but if they are it is because of a fortunate coincidence.

For instance the sales force of a particular company might be indoctrinated with the idea that its products were the best available in order to help inspire greater confidence and sales effort. By some objective standard this may or may not be true, but that would not affect the process of attempted indoctrination.)

Though compulsory education is invariably justified on the (correct) grounds that some basic intellectual abilities are necessary skills, a considerable dose of indoctrination is always included. Until the advent of the National Curriculum the only compulsory school subject was religious education. Religion is still included — preferably Christianity but some other will do if sufficiently in demand — but not non-religion as an

alternative. Significantly, perhaps, there is no provision for detailed consideration of the arguments and evidence in favour of, or against, the idea of "God".

In fact it is consideration of what is to be indoctrinated that stimulates most discussion about education. There was a reaction against the notion that the supposed virtues of hard work, patriotism, responsibility, and respect for the established authority were legitimate qualities to be inculcated or indoctrinated among some so-called liberal theorists in the 1960s and '70s. This resulted in "child-centred" education which was widely interpreted as requiring that no codes of behaviour or values were to be imposed either overtly or by implication.

The consequence for the supposedly basic purpose of education was disastrous. Anxiety about standards in literacy and numeracy, in particular, resulted in attempts to "set standards" in basic subjects. But this is evidently not considered sufficient and the opportunity has been taken to consider how to reintroduce the indoctrination of children into the supposedly traditional values.

An unfortunate side-effect of this reaction has been to associate the disastrous "child-centred" methods with individualism and libertarianism. This is, of course, a complete misunderstanding of the situation. Libertarians have generally been highly suspicious of state-controlled and tax-financed education itself. If the basics of literacy and numeracy are so important — and they are — then parents would see to it that their children were instructed in them. The provision of "free" state education effectively curtailed the efforts of the underprivileged to secure education for their children. Even more disas-

trously it delivered the educational system into the hands of some very odd theorists who were not only financed by taxes, but also had the ear of spenders of tax money — the politicians. It was the removal of control of education from parents to "experts" that was the source of the expensive educational failures.

Rather than recognise this fully we have now arrived at a curious and deceptive compromise. Parents are apparently taken notice of by supposed parental (limited) choice of school and encouragement of parent governors. But the National Curriculum has tightened the grip of experts in the selection of material taught and virtually made the acquisition of official certification a necessity for employment.

The parents and pupils are still denied the only meaningful choice — to ignore the system altogether. The true libertarian educational reform would dispense with the captive audience of impressionable children allegedly benefiting from being educated in the essential skills, but also subject to indoctrination in currently fashionable attitudes and ideas [e.g. as well as "positive" attitudes to religion and environmentalism there are numerous contrary ones — to smoking, drugs, alcohol, and "discrimination", for instance. Some might be justified, but if so then effective education in evidence assessment and logic would enable pupils to conclude that for themselves].

The only compulsory element would be to reach a certain minimum standard in literacy and numeracy by the age of (say) 16; probably in a school but not necessarily. This would instantly improve motivation for both pupils and teachers — for pupils to be able to leave the system, and for teachers to reduce their workload

OH, NO! THEY'RE 'PROTECTING' THE CHILDREN AGAIN!

Avedon Carol

A couple of years ago it would have been hard to imagine that anyone in Britain this side of Mary Whitehouse could have thought we needed more censorship, but that was before the media discovered the Internet. Add to the mix a sudden new hysteria over something the media calls 'paedophilia' (it used to be known as child-molesting) and you have the impetus for a whole new surge of moral panic and the passage of draconian laws.

Let me be honest: If I had children, I would not even touch this subject. In fact, if I had children, I would not make any attempt to raise them in this country at all; I'd leave and take my family with me.

If I were a man, I wouldn't try to talk about this subject, either. Most sensible men I know these days keep their distance from children regardless of the circumstances. They live in terror of being in a position where they might have to physically come in contact with a strange child in order to protect it from immediate danger. Many fathers are even afraid to bathe and hug their own children.

In my experience, men are more likely to express irritation than sexual interest in other people's children. But journalists have learned to misuse two new words — 'internet' and 'paedophile' - and they just can't use them enough. They particularly like to use them together, as in 'internet paedophiles'.

My dictionary says that paedophiles are people who are sexually attracted to children, and that's the way I learned to use the word more than 25 years ago when I first started reading up on sex crime and paraphilias (or what some people would just call 'perversion'). Since most paedophiles have no interest in raping children, and since there are very, very few paedophiles to start with, you'd hardly think this was something we all had to be warned against on a daily basis.

Child abusers, by and large, are not paedophiles; they are 'normal' heterosexuals who somehow become abusers, usually after having children of their own - their victims. That these two very different groups have now been confused with each other was probably inevitable: after all, the moral Right has for decades tried to cover up the well-known relationship be-

tween the family and domestic violence and abuse. Pretending that abuse is a product of outsiders, or artifacts that can be banned, makes that easy.

Chant ‘child abuse’ and ‘child pornography’ and people’s brains go dead. Even if you still have your thinking capacity, you get the message pretty quickly that you can’t argue with whatever useless new plan has been introduced to ‘protect’ children, or your motives will be questioned. After all, why should you care about freedom of speech for paedophiles? Why should you object to doing something that is meant to stop child abuse? Unless, of course, you are some sort of child-raper yourself...

The truth is that there is no evidence whatsoever that anyone has ever been harmed, or been turned into someone who harms others, by looking at pornography. There is no evidence that a single act of rape or child abuse has ever happened because of pornography. Nor is there any evidence that looking at pictures of naked children turns people into paedophiles. The reaction most people (including most paedophiles) have to images of children being sexually assaulted is one of horror, not desire.

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that the Protection of Children Act (banning child porn) is being used to interfere with completely non-abusive families and to prosecute - and persecute - innocent people. Children have been subjected to revolting inquisitions in order to ascertain whether they were abused, based on nothing more than the fact that their parents have taken innocuous photos of them without clothes on. Sex education books have been banned, and now *Health & Efficiency* is being prosecuted. People have found their faces, names, addresses, and the names of their employers blazoned across the front pages of newspapers, or even on television, accused (falsely) of being child pornographers. Lives have been disrupted, careers ruined. And for what?

In August of 1996, the *Observer* put the names and faces of two men on the front page, declaring them “peddlers of child abuse”. The first of them, Clive Feather, is a director of Demon Internet, who were resisting the idea of censoring their Usenet newsfeed. The second was Julf Helsingius, who ran a free anonymous e-mail service. Neither is responsible for child porn on the Internet, but the mere accusation was enough to make life miserable for them.

But you can be sure that few Internet servers in the United Kingdom are comfortable any more with the belief that they can run an uncensored service. Even newsgroups that merely discuss issues like homosexuality and paedophilia seem to be available through fewer and fewer servers.

Hang on a minute - discussion groups? But surely these subjects are legal to discuss. Why, they are discussed every day in the newspapers, aren’t they? Does this mean that no the only people who can openly talk about these things are the mainstream media, where children are sure to see them (I mean, let’s face it, there are no restrictions on who the *Daily Mail* can be sold to and seen by)?

Well, yes, that does seem to be the trend. You don’t think there’s a connection, do you?

Aredon Carol is the author of *Nudes, Prudes and Attitudes: Pornography and Censorship* (New Clarion Press, Gloucester, 1994), and a founding member of Feminists Against Censorship (www.fiaawol.demon.co.uk/FAC).
